

Heavy Metal Carnival and Dis-alienation: The Politics of Grotesque Realism

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Based on four years of concert fieldwork and extensive music media analysis (including bands such as Cradle of Filth, GWAR, Insane Clown Posse, Marilyn Manson, and Slipknot), this article shows how heavy metal music and its carnival culture express a dis-alienating politics of resistance. Applying Bakhtin's multifaceted conceptualization of the carnival-grotesque, the author explains how grotesque realism in metal music and performances constitutes a proto-utopian liminal alternative to the impersonal, conformist, superficial, unequal, and numbing realities of commercialism and, more abstractly, a resistance to a society of spectacle and nothingness.

Heavy metal music originated in the late 1960s and early 1970s amid Birmingham, England's, industrial working class as a "harder" sort of hard rock," most distinguished by its low, ominous-sounding "power chord" (Walser 1993:2-3). Beyond classic metal (e.g., Black Sabbath, Judas Priest, Iron Maiden), metal is typically divided into many sub-genres, including, for instance, thrash or punk metal, glam metal, and pop metal. Nu-metal (the main sub-genre of concern in this article) refers to post mid-1990s bands with more distortion, primal metal screaming and growling, less predictable riffs, much obscenity, and a plethora of possibilities for transgression. The highly transgressive, for-the-music-only spirit of heavy metal culture has served as a boundary between itself and the dis-authenticating forces of commercialism.

What also defines metal music is its social position as a site of "cultural contestation." For example, whereas millions "like or strongly like heavy metal," many more "strongly dislike it" (Walser 1993:x). Weinstein elaborates on how an anti-metal "chorus of contempt" spans the political spectrum. "The progressives," she says, "repudiate heavy metal because it substitutes hedonistic ecstasy for the political commitment and social concern that they would like to see in popular music. . . . The cultural conservatives," on the other hand, "focus on what they see as the anti-

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Symbolic Interaction, Vol. 29, Issue 1, pp. 33-48, ISSN 0195-6086, electronic ISSN 1533-8665.

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Christian symbolism of metal, . . . its themes of evil and use of symbols associated with Christian religiosity, [and] its systematic temptation whose aim is to lead youth into paths of sin" (2000:3, 237–38).

Feeding this moralistic and political fire is a line of devilish, face-painted predecessors of what I define herein as *heavy metal carnival*. These include noose-hanging and guillotine-executing Alice Cooper; bat-chomping, ant-snorting, and crucifix-wielding "Satanist" Ozzy Osbourne; and fire-breathing, viper-tongued, blood-spitting, Dressed to Kill, Kiss (My Ass) Army. Contemporary exemplars of heavy metal carnival are "Anti-Christ Superstar," "Golden Age of the Grotesque" Marilyn Manson; "F*** it all" "maggot"-inspiring, "alienated nobodies" Slipknot; "slave" master, blood and gore primal warriors GWAR; "(Dark) Carnival of Carnage" Insane Clown Posse; and Transylvanian goth, black-metal band Cradle of Filth. Heavy metal carnival breaks through the noise of commercial culture by raising the transgression ante to the extreme and challenging nearly every conceivable social rule governing taste, authority, morality, propriety, the sacred, and, some might say, civility itself. For fans, the freaky, bizarre, outrageous, and otherwise extreme aspects of the performance are important indicators of a band's dedication to the music and rejection of the forces of commercialism (even sometimes amid commercial success). (See Hannon [2005] for a further explanation of this apparent contradiction.)

The repudiation of metal music is also due, in large part, to the fact that in academe, with very few exceptions, it is studied by outsiders, given superficial treatment and analysis, and ultimately condemned as expressing and reinforcing adolescent alienation. Notable exceptions, working in the spirit of Hebdige's (1979) classic discussion of resistance in reggae and early punk, are Kotarba's (1994) analysis of Metallica, which illustrates how heavy metal is much more complex and constructive interactionally than subcultural writers were willing to acknowledge at that time; Walser's (1993) musicological analysis, which delineated the musical complexity and implicit politics of heavy metal music; and Weinstein's (2000) detailed "bricolage" of metal music and its culture from the 1980s through the mid-1990s.

Despite those works, the condemnation of heavy metal continues in the academic literature. Exemplary is *Metal Heads: Heavy Metal Music and Adolescent Alienation*, with a book cover showcasing a two-fingered love sign rather than the similar, yet symbolically distinct, thumb-tucked metal horns (as any insider would know). The author claims that the "music and subculture of heavy metal are symptoms of a pervasive failure of socialization in American society" (Arnett 1995:17). His argument, in brief, is that metalhead alienation is the consequence of too much choice and freedom, or "alienated-individualism," and an affliction, in particular, of (ostensibly) rageful and destructive white male working-class youth. Arnett's fan profiles describe cynical and angry male youth from troubled and broken homes, often rent with abuse and neglect, who act out reckless and self-destructive urges with songs about "drug and alcohol use," "hatred and violence," "angst and protest," "satan and the supernatural," "sex, love (sort of), and the heavy metal life" (pp. 46–53).

This article challenges the thesis that heavy metal music expresses and reinforces

alienation and tempers the idea that heavy metal is not political. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin ([1936] 1984:19), I explain heavy metal carnival as a politics of “grotesque realism.” For outsiders, grotesque realism, or rebelling against potentially everything that is moral, sacred, decent, or civilized, is a certain mark of alienation. Understood from the inside as carnival, however, metal is a dis-alienating, liminal utopia of human freedom, creativity, and egalitarianism. As symbolic interaction and existential sociology would put it, heavy metal music is a critical source of positive meaning for its audiences’ everyday life needs (Kotarba 2002).

METHODS AND DATA

This article is based on four years (2000 to 2004) of concert fieldwork study involving observation and informal interviews with hundreds of fans and selected band members at over fifty concerts in the greater Philadelphia area, eastern rural Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. I also conducted extensive music media analyses of CDs, music videos, and fan and band Web sites and literature. The study began naively by exploring anger, alienation, and delinquency in youth music, then narrowed in focus to the most transgressive, shocking, and otherwise carnivalesque contemporary Caucasian bands increasingly making it into the mainstream. The majority of bands are nu-metal, but they also include death-metal, black-metal, and rap-core. The majority of fans—about 80 percent at most concerts—were white males in their early teens through late twenties, but there were some older fans, into their thirties and, occasionally, a bit older. Fans interviewed included high school and college students, high school dropouts, service workers, blue-collar laborers, and white-collar professionals. The form of alienation noted most often in interviews was *consumer alienation*, or feeling fed up with the pressures of living in a hyper-commercialized society.

In my study of metal music and its cultural context, I have aimed to achieve and maintain a relationship with it and its fans as an intimate outsider or marginal sociologist who vacillates between subjectivity and objectivity. Although my position as a woman and professor and my research activities into the more general and theoretical meanings of metal music have contributed to an outsider status, my immersion directly into the music and music scenes, intimate conversations with fans and band members, youthful appearance and dress, and nonjudgmental persistence to understand the fan point of view have aided in enhancing friendly rapport and increasing the validity of this report. Framing metal culture from the inside was essential to understanding it as dis-alienating and to forming a framework unbound by the ordinary moral and structural constraints and judgments of everyday life.

Elsewhere (Halnon 2004), I report the “dis-alienating attractions” of shock music carnival, a multi-musical-genre of the carnival-grotesque that traverses the mainstream and the high underground, or bands that have quite a large and often subculturally distinct following but not everyone knows about them. Drawing on rich ethnographic data, I illustrate in that report how fans experience carnivalesque music

scenes as outcast communities of belonging, as celebrations of tolerance and egalitarianism, as extraordinary places for freedom of self-expression, and most importantly, as refreshing, multifaceted “difference” from the commercialized mainstream. The more narrow focus of this article is on the multiple ways heavy metal music resonates with the carnival-grotesque described by Mikhail Bakhtin, the foremost authority on medieval carnival.

In the remainder of this article, I illustrate how heavy metal carnival is a disalienating politics of grotesque realism. It is a creative liminal utopia of human freedom, equality, community, and abundance, a challenge to the falsification of everyday life, a cathartic outlet for everyday aggression, and a medium for experiencing the exhilaration of wide-awake and focused life. In the final section, drawing on works by Debord, Kellner, and Ritzer, I argue that heavy metal carnival is a proto-utopian politics of resistance against an alienating society of spectacle and nothingness, practiced in liminal spaces that give pause to everyday life.

GROTESQUE REALISM IN HEAVY METAL CARNIVAL

Derived from the Latin *limens*, liminality means “a threshold passage betwixt and between two separate places.” Carson explains further that it is “time filled with ambiguity” where there is “a confusion of all customary categories” (1997:3–4). As Turner (1995) argues, liminality is a form of anti-structure, or a ritually organized time-out from the rules and regulations governing everyday life. For Bakhtin ([1936] 1984), who applied this concept powerfully to the medieval carnival, it is a time to vent, release, resist, hector, parody, and rebel. It is a highly transgressive, playful retreat from, and inversion and debasement of, the totality of officialdom.

Grotesque Realism

To emphasize a crucial distinction for Bakhtin, the carnival-grotesque is not simply what is disgusting or obscene in a limited sense but a potentially limitless challenge to the structural and moral orders of everyday life. Thus, he uses the grotesque as an umbrella term for a comedic, satirical “exaggeration of the improper,” an excessive and superabundant transgression of all limits ([1936] 1984:306–7).

Emphasizing the dis-alienating quality of the grotesque, Bakhtin says that, whether directed toward the underworld of the earth or toward the body, the grotesque aims at a creative and liberatory realism that asserts the “collective ancestral body of all the people” (p. 19). Through “degradation,” or “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, [or] abstract,” the grotesque is “a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (pp. 19–20). A “utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance” is thus the creative triumph of the carnival-grotesque (p. 9). Summarizing his most important idea, Bakhtin says that the carnival-grotesque offers an opportunity to “suspend all conventions and established truths, to realize the relative nature of all that exists,

and to enter a completely new order of things” (p. 34). In Bakhtin’s carnival, “the world is destroyed so that it may be regenerated and renewed” (p. 48).

Grotesque Bodies

At the very center of grotesque imagery is the grotesque body that transgresses the ordinary limits between itself and the outer world. Bakhtin explains,

Eating, drinking, defecation, and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body—all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body. . . . The grotesque image displays not only the outward but also the inner features of the body: blood, bowels, heart and other organs. Its outward and inward features are often emerged into one. ([1936] 1984: 317–18)

The significance of the grotesque body is that it refuses the ordinary separations between body and outer world, interior and exterior, or life and death. Instead, there is an open-ended, spectacular display that signifies the creative life-death-rebirth cycle.

In heavy metal carnival, the grotesque body is dramatized by a communal flow of human excretions such as spit, blood, vomit, urine, semen, and faeces. For example, in a parodic inversion of good and evil, sacred and profane, this-worldly and other-worldly, and life and death, “Reverend” Marilyn Manson (of LeVay’s Church of Satan) engages in baptismal (life-giving, purifying, renewing) spitting at the audience from a profanely branded water bottle. In other inversion rituals, Manson self-mutilates his chest with razors or glass, offering his blood as the sacrificial anti-Christ superstar. In a more basic inversion of inside and outside, he sticks his long finger down his throat to lightly regurgitate before the audience.

GWAR (God What an Awful Racket) celebrates the grotesque body as scantily clad primal warrior band members playfully hose the audience of “slaves” with the (water-colored) “blood” of “insufferable human filth,” ejaculate via a gigantic strap-on penis hose, and hack, behead, and disembowel bloody victims with swords, exposing severed heads, huge bloody intestines, and various other body organs such as brains, hearts, and livers. In their fan video *It’s \$leazy* (Slave Pit and Metal Blade Records 2001), GWAR’s woman character, Slymenstra Hymen, proudly pulls out and dangles a darkly red, dripping, super-absorbent pig-sucking tampon, exposing the bloody sow (a grotesque ritual display of women’s life-giving menses as well as a transgressive display of the basic animal-human relation or “attachment”). For many fans there is nothing quite like GWAR, whose shows are on-stage comedic horror shows, with gory story lines, an array of disgusting dialogues and behaviors, and active, cheerful, if not elated, audience participation.

Of special significance to the grotesque body is the scatological. For example, anal and excremental obscenity is a regular ritual at Manson concerts, where he throws an ass-wiped towel or American flag into the audience. Manson’s stage spectacle includes a bent-over body and hand-held exposed crack from which dripping, dark

liquid excrement rolls down the crease and leg of the anal liberator. Although Manson has made much spectacular use of the excremental, other metal bands have also employed this standard feature of the grotesque body. For example, Slipknot, a band with the slogan “people=shit,” flings “excrement” into the audience. Regular staples of GWAR’s shows include people rising out of “talking toilets” being defecated upon and then flushed. GWAR’s “Scumdogs of the Universe,” with LPs such as *This Toilet Earth* and tours labeled “When the Shit Hits the Fans” (1994), are said to be “chaotic and disease ridden beings,” “an ultra elite group of warriors especially culled from the lowest dregs of filth” who were created by the Master of All Reality who, after giving birth to the universe, defecated and wiped his ass.¹

Although all the imagery of grotesque bodies described above would be judged seriously vile, obscene, or disgusting—expressions of alienation to the extreme—in ordinary life, in the liminal time and place of carnival, they are just so many spectacles that playfully dramatize and expose what is hidden yet common to all human beings. Interpreted from within this frame of reference, bodily excretions, innards and orifices, and the ludic violence of exposing them are ritual celebrations of dis-alienating human equality. Presdee further articulates the significance of the human-equalizing grotesque body:

[Bakhtin] sees carnival as a celebration of the connectedness of the body to the world. . . . This position is wholly opposed to the sobriety of the classical body, separated from the process of life. . . . Indeed, as carnival inverts the social structure, so too does it invert the body, for in the carnival universe the head (the location of reason) is uncrowned by the stomach, the genitals and the arse. Faeces and the fart, the burp and the belly laugh all become an integral part of the logic of carnival. (2000:39)

Bakhtin ([1936] 1984:353–54) says further that the grotesque body not only exposes what is veiled (its genitalia, its smells, its eruptions) and what is hidden inside (its fluids, its “wastes,” or its organs), but it also can be detected by movements such as spasms, tensions, popping eyes, convulsions of arms and legs, or hanging tongues. He interprets these movements as “a peculiar mimicking of death-resurrection; the same body that tumbles into the grave rises again, incessantly moving from the lower to the upper level.” Most exemplary are Manson’s past performances impersonating someone between a pseudo-Nazi and the Vulgarian Child Catcher (of the Disney movie *Chitty, Chitty, Bang, Bang*) in the song “AntiChrist Superstar.” There he tears up a Mormon bible and repeatedly flails his long, thin, and uniquely flaccid body over a huge pulpit as he demands that followers “repent” from conformity and declares the coming liberation from the fascism of “Christianity” and “the police state mentality.” In performances such as this, Manson’s body is quintessentially uncivilized. It is exceedingly loose, lanky, flaccid, and flailing; long fingers and wrists flop about, and his body contorts as it falls, rolls, twists, humps, and gyrates in strong fits of breaking out.

In a similar way, Slipknot band members express this liminal, de-civilized, and de-sublimated spirit as they assault each other to the point of breaking bones and

roll and hump about the floor stage. Band member Cracken says, "I'm famous for hitting myself in the face and beating the shit out of myself" (Bozza 2000). *Barcode Killers* further explains, "In every second of every song you can almost hear the hatred and frustration that springs from Slipknot's upbringing" (Crampton 2001:36). The fan video *Slipknot: Welcome to Our Neighborhood* (Doom Films Production 1999) explains finally, "Basically [it's] nine people working out every poison that ever affected them in their life and putting it on tape."

According to Bakhtin, the grotesque body that is so central to carnival can also be detected by grotesque anatomy, such as exaggerated, mutilated, or dismembered parts, "most frequently shown open with its interior exposed" ([1936] 1984:354–55). Illustrating this characteristic is GWAR band leader Oderus Urungus, who is described as follows in "slave" fan book *Rumble in Antartica* (Overton 1999:79): "His flesh is visibly rotting, ravaged by flesh eating pestilence that he freely spreads to all those who come into contact with him. . . . He loves to spray crowds with his vomit, but finds it even better to use his sword 'Lick' to hack his victims to pieces." Similarly grotesque in anatomy is the description of band member Balsac, the Jaws of Death: "Ravaged by a horrible disease, his face and head have been eaten away to an unattractive, deeply scarred lump." The significance of grotesque anatomy for Bakhtin is that "the confines dividing [the body] from the world are obscured. Its exterior aspect is not distinct from the inside, and the exchange between the body and the world is constantly emphasized" ([1936] 1984:355). In other words, the grotesque body is open to the earth.

Inversion

The carnival-grotesque is not only exposing the deep (hidden, vile, disgusting), interior aspects of anatomy but also what is spurned, spoiled, stained, and hidden in the body politic. Inverting the ordinary devaluation, invisibility, or "symbolic annihilation" of those positioned at the bottom of (social) hierarchies (Larry Gross quoted in Gamson 1998:22), in heavy metal carnival the leaders and inspirational guides are the freaky and the bizarre and include elaborately costumed, painted, and masked criminals, prisoners, scum, scumdogs of the universe, primal warriors, barcode killers, alienated nobodies, pseudo-Nazis, anti-Christ, grotesque burlesque strippers, serial killer clowns, sex pot serial killers, Transylvanian goths, and live prowling gargoyles. As Presdee explains, "carnival is a playful and pleasurable revolution, where those normally excluded from the discourse of power may lift their voices in anger and celebration" (2000:42).

The exposure, elevation, and celebration of the marginalized and the stigmatized are apparent in Slipknot's *Barcode Killers* (Crampton 2001:11–13), where it is explained that the band is made up of young men with previous job histories as Burger King clerk, gas station worker, welder, and DJ, and that it identifies itself as being from the "nowhere zone" or the "capital of boredom." Dramatizing their proudly self-labeled "alienation," these rural "nobodies" and "misfits" from Des Moines, Iowa, have numbers (0–8) rather than names, wear matching industrial coveralls marked

with their numbers and the random barcode number (742617000027) from their first album *Mate. Feed. Kill. Repeat.* (1996), and further describe themselves as “a bunch of blood-sucking freaks.” Shawn (#6) says of their music, “It’s the discordant sound of the middle of nowhere, a terrain where Slipknot is jester and king.”² Politicizing their grotesquely elaborated consumer alienation, the explicit inversive aim of Slipknot is to present “a radical, no-holds-barred picture, reflecting the harshness and ugliness of commercialism today” (Crampton 2001:11).

Experiencing Collectivity and Community

Heavy metal carnival, like Bakhtin’s carnival, is “not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all people” ([1936] 1984:7). In heavy metal carnival, fans bond in subcultural groups of “slaves” (GWAR), “maggots” (Slipknot), “goths” (Cradle of Filth), and “juggalos” (ICP “family” that rejects the stylistic label “fan”). They share elaborate folklore, violent and war-like mythological stories, and dark fantasies with their playfully devilish heralds. In the case of ICP, they “get down with the clowns,” camping out and partying each summer at their Annual Gathering of the Juggalos. Violent J awed over the surreal festivities of 2001:

The Gathering is unreal, unreal. It’s f***ing unreal! . . . Those f***ng Juggalos were so creative. They had lights hanging from the trees. They were dancing in the woods, . . . the bitches were walking around naked, . . . it was the ultimate experience. We bring in all the catering, ten little different carnival stands, foods, lit up carnival stands selling everything. It’s four days of music, . . . partying, total crazy f***ing nonsense! (personal interview, Wicked Wonka Tour, Philadelphia, 2003)

In heavy metal carnival, fans rage, swear, chant with middle fingers and metal horns, and other billingsgate. They body thrash, mosh, body surf, and delight in parade stripping rituals. As in Bakhtin’s carnival, amid sweaty bodies pushing, grabbing, swaying, rubbing, and touching, the crowd is made “concrete and sensual.” Among the “pressing throng, the physical contact of bodies, . . . [t]he individual feels that he is an indissoluble part of the collectivity, a member of the people’s mass body. . . . The people become aware of their sensual, material bodily unity and community” (Bakhtin [1936] 1984:255). This more subtle yet powerful carnival experience may be among the most transgressive aspects of heavy metal carnival, for it grates against a society that places primacy on autonomy, self-interest, and individualism.

Liberation from Truth and Order

Carnival is a “second life,” a “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order, . . . the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (Bakhtin [1936] 1984:10). Exemplary of this spirit is Manson’s song “1996,” a litany of “anti” sentiment that declares Manson and his chanting co-celebrants as being “anti-choice, anti-girl . . . anti-white, and anti-man . . . anti-sober,

anti-whore.” In this song Manson emphasizes radical self-stylization and denounces the “doping” of the masses via control and conformity to mainstream values, beliefs, behaviors, socially constructed identities, and Christianity, in particular.

Aiming to raise the transgression ante even higher, Slipknot band members say in their video *Slipknot: Welcome to Our Neighborhood* (Doom Films Production 1999), in an implicit comparison with Manson: “To say we’re anti-religion is junk. We’re anti-everything.” The chorus of their song “Surfacing” is perhaps the very best condensed expression of the carnival spirit. Slipknot screams in a deep, throaty growl,

F*** it all
 F*** this world
 F*** everything that you stand for
 Don’t belong
 Don’t exist
 Don’t give a shit
 Don’t ever judge me!

Liberation from Interior Censors

Like circus daredevils (tightrope walkers, trapeze artists, or lion tamers) who awe and amaze with extraordinary feats beyond the capacities or nerve of ordinary people, heavy metal carnival features *moral daredevils* with the courage and conviction to reject anything and anyone, to transgress against any rule, and to say absolutely anything they want to. In other words, they inspire fans by getting “down” to the dis-alienating truth of self-expression: to be as confident as they are, that no matter what anyone says about them to know who they are, tell it like it is, and “just don’t give a f***” about others’ judgments! Conveying the carnival spirit, when I asked a twenty-four-year-old male warehouse worker about his “rebellious” Cradle of Filth T-shirt that said “Jesus is a C*nt,” he explained, “It’s kind of a sick joke. Kids today speak their minds and are not really going to back down. Everybody’s got to have a free mind.” The latter comment resonates with Bakhtin when he says, “Laughter . . . overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations” ([1936] 1984:90). Carnival laughter “liberates not only from external censorship, but first of all from the great interior censor.”

Destructive Humor

Just as the anti-everything spirit may be misunderstood as simply a case of alienation, so too might the violence and death imagery that saturates the heavy metal carnival scene. As in Bakhtin’s carnival where “devils are excellent and jovial fellows” ([1936] 1984:41), in heavy metal carnival the ominous and death-like commingle with lighter ludic (or outrageous and ultimately comedic) play. For example, Cradle of Filth’s dark and devilish black-metal band members fling hundreds of toilet paper streams into the audience, fill the stage area with silly string, and fire off awe-inspiring

sparklers from the hands of dark gray, body-painted, black-horned, and gas-masked creatures dancing in the stage background. By the end of the concert, the stage is a total mess of paper and wet string as the band members continue to roar their extremely heavy, eerie-sounding, low-keyed black-metal music. Similarly, ICP, a band that integrates a hip-hop sensitivity with a metal format, fills the concert hall with confetti and takes “Faygo breaks” from their explicitly labeled “Dark Carnival” aimed at serial killing the selfish and perverted “chickens” and “piggies” of the world. This signature ritual—that originally emerged playfully and spontaneously with fans—involves spraying face-painted, frolicking juggalos with the stickiness of “ghetto soda” (or what ICP otherwise defines as cheap and affordable soda from the impoverished area of Detroit where they grew up). “Wicked clown” band leaders Violent J and Shaggy 2-Dope drench the audience with a twenty-gallon round bucket, two huge super-soakers, and 400 to 700 shaken, sprayed, and thrown two-liter bottles. Any respectable novice ICP fan worth his or her black and white, insane clown face-paint must obtain at least one empty, sticky, smashed up Faygo bottle by the end of the concert, lest they be playfully demoted to the status of “juggaho.” More seasoned members of the ICP “family” are content with more general celebrations of “clown luv,” the bonding ethic among juggalos who define themselves as outsiders or “those who don’t fit in where they are.”

GWAR exemplifies carnivalesque ludic violence with its many lampooning rituals, often lead by Oderus Urungus, leader of the Scumdogs. In one lampooning ritual (Electric Factory, Philadelphia, March 28, 2002), one (unidentified) GWAR band member arrived on stage costumed as “Iron Mike Tyson.” Oderus made some jokes about how stupid he was and, while breaking out in a song, severed the boxer’s hands and decapitated him. Next, out came “Osama Bin Laden,” and the entire crowd broke out in laughter. He arrived piñata style from a hidden panel in the ceiling. Oderus asked him if the “American pig dogs” got what they deserved. Osama responded with turkey gobbles. Oderus then commanded him to “speak f***ing English,” and promptly killed him. Blood sprayed through the elated crowd, many swallowing the red-colored water and letting it soak their white T-shirts as a badge of honor. President Bush came next and congratulated GWAR for taking care of Osama and for contributing to the blood drive. Bush then said that there were “5000 or so minorities, oops, I mean prisoners in the U.S.” and that he wanted to contribute them to the cause. The band played on, Bush was killed, and the “blood drive” ensued. Finally, out came the Pope who was fed to a giant puppet dinosaur. Oderus slayed the dinosaur, shoving a huge sword through its mouth and out the top of its head. The crowd laughed and cheered for more. Later in the show, “slaves” or “insufferable human filth” were invited on stage, subjected to ludic beheading, and escaped through a side exit (thus giving ritual expression to the fundamental life-death polarity of carnival).

Grotesque violence and death saturate heavy metal carnival as a plethora of theatrical shows contain physical fighting, mutilation of self and others, pillaging, murder, and war. This is akin to Bakhtin’s description of the centrality of violence and

death in medieval carnival: “We also see the downward movement in fights, beatings, and blows; they throw their adversary to the ground, trample him into the earth. They bury their victim. But at the same time they are creative; they sow and harvest” ([1936] 1984:370). Bakhtin elaborates on the totalistic challenge of “destructive humor” when he says, “Destructive humor is not directed against isolated negative aspects of reality but against all reality, against the finite world as a whole” (p. 42). Finally, sociologists Berger and Luckmann clarify the quintessential challenge carnivalesque violence and death pose to the stability of social reality itself: “The experience of death of others and, subsequently, the anticipation of one’s own death posits the marginal situation par excellence. . . . Needless to elaborate, death also posits the most terrifying threat to the taken-for-granted realities of everyday life” ([1966] 1985:101).

Thus, playing with death, confronting it directly as a form of re-creation, is perhaps the carnivalesque theme par excellence. It is a transgressive challenge to all socially objective definitions of ordinary, everyday, taken-for-granted reality, the goal of carnival taken to its furthest extreme.

Rebirth

Bakhtin says that carnival is “a true feast of becoming, change, and renewal” ([1936] 1984:10). He elaborates, “To degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of non-existence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place. Grotesque realism knows no other level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving” (p. 21).

Heavy metal carnival challenges, exposes, and transcends the limits between body and world, interior and exterior, and life and death. It celebrates body-world connectedness, inverts what is hidden, spurned, spoiled, and devalued, and liberates from truth and order and from all interior censors. Ultimately, it is a challenge to all objective reality. In the language of social psychology, the extreme pleasure one feels amid the collective effervescence of heavy metal carnival—at least for those with the daredevil courage to risk a few hours of moral abandon—involves what George Herbert Mead might call a temporary clarification of the divided self, or giving free reign to the uninhibited, spontaneous “me.” The urgent desire today of so many to indulge this unmitigated aspect of the self (in heavy metal carnival and far beyond amid a zeitgeist of shock, spectacle, and transgression) may be understood as an increasingly necessary form of relief and release from the immense socio-psychological clutter of commercial culture.

In heavy metal carnival, the word fans use to reference rebirth is “energy.” And, like other extremely intense and transformative experiences (from spiritual ecstasy to jumping out of airplanes), the meaning of the term is largely ineffable. Searching for words, as fans typically do, a twenty-year-old male replied to my request to define it, “I don’t know. It’s one of those words you can’t describe. Energy is like all your emotions coming out at once.” Struggling to convey the intensity, he finally ex-

claimed, "It's road rage!" (Ozzfest, Ford Pavillion, Scranton, Pennsylvania, August 5, 2003). Others at Summer Sanitarium (Giants Stadium, New Rutherford, New Jersey, July 8, 2003) explained: "You get all your emotions out. It's like therapy"; and, "Instead of going out and hurting someone [with negative energy, or the pent-up feelings of frustration and anger accumulated in everyday life], go out and have a good time with it."

Therapeutic release of aggression is experienced by getting into the metal milieu, by head banging, body thrashing, chanting, swearing, and giving the "finger" (to each other, to the band, and, more generally, to the crowd) in celebratory appreciation. Bandleaders enhance the experience by "pumping up" the crowd or aiding the surfacing of energy with questions such as, "Are you alive, Philadelphia? Can you feel that emotion?" and declarations like, "It's about time someone woke your sorry asses up!" or "*The ENERGY* in this f***ing building!"

The best barometer of energy release at metal concerts is the intensity of physical activity in the crowd. One ritualized form—beyond those noted above—is body surfing, which involves entrusting one's reclined body (face up) to the group, to be hand-passed toward the stage and (hopefully) caught and let down by concert security. Another significant ritualized energy-release activity is moshing, an intense circle dance in which participants (typically male) move in a circular motion, kicking their feet and waving their arms as if they are pulling chains, with elbows and bodies knocking against each other. At a Slipknot concert (Wachovia Spectrum, Philadelphia, March 5, 2005), I marveled in my notes as to how "moshing rituals represent a transgressive celebration of community" and are "a modern primitive tribal dance outside and implicitly at odds with the many layers of hyper-rationality and ethic of individualism that pervade everyday life." To be inside the pit (where, personally, I have never been) is to experience a peak in the exhilaration of freedom that can be experienced by all at metal concerts. Two moshers explained retrospectively,

You feel great. You have all that energy inside of you. It's kind of like an adrenaline rush, and even if you get hit, you don't really feel it. . . . When you're throwing your arms you just feel freedom.

A very free feeling, like you don't have any controls on your behavior. You're free to do whatever you want to. . . . Once you get in there, you realize . . . it's just an opportunity to be free for awhile. . . . You don't have to worry about anything.

A nineteen-year-old male college sophomore explained his experience of being in a higher state of mind when leaving the pit: "I was all beat up and sore. Then afterwards, I was just laying there completely relaxed, like I was floating. . . . It's like a state out of your mind. It doesn't feel real. It's like a step above. It's comparable to sports, 'cuz you're exhilarating all your energy. You're hurt. You're in pain. But somehow it just feels great."

He finally explained, as so many others have, the therapeutic value of releasing negative energy, immediately and, also, as a welcomed inoculation beyond the concert scene: "Your head's completely clear. Your mind's completely blank. You can

focus rather than being stressed out. That's afterward, when you're in some kind of state. . . . I've had it last for days after. My mind would still be clear and nothing would piss me off."

Increasingly, I have come to understand aggression release at metal concerts as resistance to and temporary reprieve from the everyday emotional consequences of living in consumer society or amid a fast-paced, impersonal, superficial, and hyper-individualistic society of spectacle and nothingness.

SPECTACLE, NOTHINGNESS, AND BEYOND THE COMMODIFICATION OF DISSENT

For French critical theorist Guy Debord, "the world of the spectacle . . . is the world of commodity ruling over all lived experience" ([1967] 1995:26). Elaborating on this totalitarian vision of alienated consumption in modern capitalist consumer society, he says further, "The commodity's mechanical accumulation unleashes a *limitless artificiality* in the face of which all living desire is disarmed. The cumulative power of this autonomous realm of artifice necessarily everywhere entails a *falsification of life*" (pp. 44–45). Problematizing resistance, Debord goes on to suggest that, in a world of endless commodified pseudo-gratifications, even "dissatisfaction itself becomes a commodity as soon as the economics of affluence finds a way of applying its production methods to this particular raw material" (p. 38).

Adding empirical substance to Debord's claims, Frank and Weiland (1997) describe how the ideology of counterculture today is essentially indistinguishable from the ideology of corporate culture. The writers discuss the commercialization of beatnik, grunge, and punk *styles* and the corporate cultivation of the "rebel consumer" and argue that rebellion, revolution, and/or counterculture have become standard catchphrases of the new standard marketing strategy. Frank elaborates on how *rebellion is the zeitgeist of capitalist marketing ideology*. Elsewhere (Klein 2000; *Merchants of Cool* 2001), youth cultures have been described as the objects of "cultural mining" and "arrested development" and merely promotional tools for the culture industry.

Heavy metal carnival holds no special insurance against the forces of commercialism. However, a nine-member band (number one economic proof for many Slipknot fans of the band's loyalty to the music) being ostracized from Total Request Live (TRL) and Clear Channel radio play (sociocultural proof of loyalty for ICP juggalos) and enduring instead as creatively transgressive bands of the high underground (general proof for GWAR and Cradle of Filth fans) do offer, at least for now (and from the inside), something that is not simply reducible to the commodification of dissent. Concerning Marilyn Manson, most fans would consider what I have written as a historical record of what the artist once was, prior to selling out.

Whether enduring or fleeting, heavy metal carnival is a politics of dissatisfaction and a demand for difference from the commercialized mainstream. It is resistance to superficiality and duplicity, to pressures to conform, and to un-equalizing judg-

ments. It is a demand for community, freedom, and equality and an opportunity to surface, release, and transform everyday frustrations and aggression into wide-awake, focused consciousness and the exhilaration of being alive. Thus, what takes place inside heavy metal carnival challenges what Debord describes as a society that is everywhere “marked by alienation, totalitarian control, and passive spectacular consumption” (in McDonough 2002:157).

In heavy metal carnival, the world of spectacle is transformed. This is exemplified, in particular, in the exhilaration of wide-awake, focused consciousness through participatory rituals involving the de-sublimated surfacing and transformation of anger, aggression, violence, and death. In the liminal moments and hours of carnival, there are many possibilities for what Ritzer (1999) calls “enchaining a disenchanted world” via the revival of fantasy, dreams, magic, and mystery, or in certain “islands of consumption.”

More recently, Ritzer (2004) has argued that the expansion of global capital has entailed the “globalization of nothing,” or living amid social forms that are centrally controlled and conceived, impersonal, superficial, lacking distinctive content, and mass produced. However, he argues that, even though forces of globalization have largely eliminated pure forms of local culture, “glocalized” sites of consumption (albeit themselves a product of the culture industry) may offer at least a greater degree of fulfillment, with products and services that are more local, distinctive, personal, and otherwise enchanting. Kellner’s (2003) work similarly articulates the magnitude of a society of spectacle, avoids a totalitarian Debordian vision, and emphasizes the possibilities of contradictions, conflicts, and resistance. His general thesis states that spectacles are “contested terrain.” That is, although corporate-orchestrated spectacles dominate the media landscape, they are also pluralistic and heterogeneous sites of resistance. In this article, I have shown, at least in brief, how heavy metal carnival, in all its elaborately grotesque expressions, is a politics that insists on a *human equalizing realism*—in a word, a politics that insists on the *dis-alienating*.

The claim that carnival is *ultimately* a conservative phenomenon is not new. But what Bakhtin insists upon repeatedly is that liminal reality *is reality*: a creative medium for and by the people for imagining and living (at least for a few utopian hours) a radical difference from the everyday, oppressive status quo. The very practice of disengaging from the world—or what metal fans critique more narrowly and *implicitly* as commercialism—is to realize the possibility and desirability of difference. To elaborate and celebrate this desire as the carnival-grotesque is to reclaim and to re-create local culture, or to experience the dark side of heavy metal culture as “pregnant death, a death that gives birth” (Bakhtin [1936] 1984:25).

Acknowledgments: I am grateful for research support from Penn State Abington’s Faculty Research Development Grants, the ACURA program, and the Rubin Endowment, which have made the scope and depth of this research possible. Many thanks to Joe Kotarba for his constructive editorial advice and to the many fans and band members who provided valuable insight and direction.

NOTES

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